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Return of the John Birch Society:

A progenitor of conspiracy-minded politics rises again in Texas

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Return of the John Birch Society:

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By

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2017

Dedication

To my wife, Maggie Savage, and children, Ameila and Emmett Savage, for their love. To Bill Minutaglio and Kathleen McElroy for their fine editing and words of encouragement.

Abstract

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John Michael Savage, Jr., MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisors: Robert Jensen, Kathleen McElroy, Bill Minutaglio

Ostracized for decades, the John Birch Society, one of the powerful cornerstones of the late 1950s and 1960s extreme conservative movement, is making a comeback in Texas. In early 2017, in the tiny farming town of Holland, new members gather in a church annex to learn about a secret conspiracy to emasculate ordinary Americans by taking their guns, their religion, and their heritage. In sprawling Houston, the nation's fourth largest city, members listen eagerly as a Southern Baptist pastor (who doubles as a George Washington impersonator) thunders that President Trump was sent from God to save the country.

"John Birch Society membership in Texas has doubled in the last three years, and state legislators are joining the group," says Jan Carter, a 75-year-old retiree who leads the Central Texas Chapter of the John Birch Society.

This report is a journey into the singular world of the John Birch Society in Texas, a world riven with far-right, conspiracy-minded ideology. The report examines the sociological, political, and psychological forces that have contributed to the resurgence of the John Birch Society; forces that are underreported in the mainstream media, and forces that helped propel Donald Trump to the White House.

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On an unseasonably warm Saturday in January, Jan Carter, an unpretentious 75-year-old retiree, appears pleased. The Central Texas Chapter of the John Birch Society, which Carter leads, is conducting a workshop titled "The Constitution is the Solution" in the farming town of Holland, home to 1,200 residents, an annual corn festival, one stoplight, and three churches. Carter was not sure if people would come to the remote community to listen to lectures about the Constitution so early on a Saturday morning, but, one by one, people show up. Their presence gives Carter "hope that the country can be saved."

On this morning, 25 small American flags planted in front of the Church of Christ flap in the wind. In the church annex, around the corner from a main street lined with empty buildings, Carter sits down to talk. "Liberals and the Republican establishment may not like us, but we are absolutely in the mainstream of conservatism, especially in Texas," Carter insists.

Businessman Robert Welch founded the John Birch Society in 1958, at the tail end of the McCarthy-era Red Scare, when fears of Communist infiltration had pervaded the national imagination for almost two decades. Welch, who opposed the civil rights movement, the United Nations, and water fluoridation, started the society to fight the communists he was dead certain had infiltrated the U.S. government. At its heyday in the mid-1960s, the John Birch Society had 100,000 dues-paying members and 60 full-time staff.

But Welch's incendiary brand of anti-Communism—he called Dwight Eisenhower "a conscious agent of the communist conspiracy"—prompted some conservatives, including William F. Buckley, Jr., editor of the influential conservative magazine *National Review*, to question the organization. Buckley called the Birchers "far removed from common sense." Buckley's criticism, and the fact that some Americans were growing weary of the intimidation and blacklisting used by Communist hunters around the nation, led to the exclusion of the John Birch Society from mainstream conservatism by the late 1960s.

But, after decades of declining membership and influence, the Birchers insist they are making a comeback. It's a resurgence rooted in anti-big government, anti-illegal immigration and anti-globalization passion. It's a conspiracy-minded fervor that swelled during the last few years and helped catapult Donald Trump to the White House. Texas is the epicenter of the resurrection.

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In the Holland church annex, Carter invites me to look at the John Birch Society literature that covers a white plastic table. The *New American* magazine warns about the federal government gathering data from pacemakers, appliances, and toys. There's also a stack of DVDs titled "*Exposing Terrorism"* and pamphlets forecasting the threat posed by Agenda 21—the "UN's plan to establish control over all human activity."

"John Birch Society membership in Texas has doubled in the last three years," Carter explains,"and state legislators are joining the group." Carter says she won't disclose exact numbers (per John Birch Society policy) but she is not alone in thinking that something really big is being unleashed deep in the heart of Texas. People are

convinced there is a clear and present danger posed not only by liberals but also by the moderate Republican establishment.

"There definitely is an increase in [John Birch Society] activity, particularly in Texas, because Americans are seeking answers, but they can't quite put their finger on what some of the real problems are," says Bill Hahn, Vice President of Communications for the John Birch Society. Hahn spoke to me on the phone from the society's main office, in Appleton, Wisconsin. Official membership statistics are confidential, he says.

The Birchers have powerful allies in Texas. Senator Ted Cruz, Representative Louie Gohmert, and several state senators and representatives advocate John Birch Society positions that go back to the founding days of the organization. They want to return the nation to what they call its Christian foundations and to slash the size of the federal government by abolishing the Federal Reserve, the Department of Education, the Environmental Protection agency and dozens of other federal programs

Just as important to the movement as these politicians is an army of dedicated, politically active foot soldiers. Some have been in the fight for decades, such as Carter, and others are only now waking up to what they perceive as existential threats facing the country. Concerned citizens in small towns across Texas, and America, want to seize the momentum that Trump has inspired, and to wage war on foreign invaders (from Mexico to the Middle East) and limousine liberals from Washington who want to emasculate ordinary Americans by taking away their guns, their religion, and their heritage.

In the church annex, Joyce Jones, a thin, neatly coiffed, middle-aged woman introduces herself as workshop's official facilitator. She also says she is a professor of

psychology at Central Texas College in Killeen. The town, located an hour north of Austin, is home to Fort Hood, the world's largest military base (by area).

The workshop consists of six 45-minute lectures on DVD, divided over two Saturday mornings. Jones hands us worksheets with fill-in-the-blank and multiple-choice questions to answer while we listen to each lecture. "In other words, we won't be just zoning out in front of the TV," she says.

In the first video, titled "The Dangers of Democracy," the lecturer, Robert Brown, a 30-something white man in a dark suit, defines democracy as "mob rule," and emphasizes that the United States is a republic, not a democracy. Brown has a point. The United States is not a direct democracy where laws are made by majority vote, but rather a representative democracy, or what some call a democratic republic.

"It wasn't what government did that made America great," Brown says in the video. "It was what government was prevented from doing that made the difference."

When the lecture finishes, Jones brings up "Chinese Dictator Mao Zedong." She tells us that Chairman Mao proclaimed, "Democracies inevitably lead to collectivism, which leads to socialism, which leads to communism, which leads to totalitarianism."

The second video lecture hammers home the point that the federal government has overstepped its constitutional authority and encroached on states' rights. Two hours into the workshop we start the third video, which advocates that the Federal Reserve be abolished and the United States return to the gold standard.

A five-minute bathroom break is announced, and I use the free time to ask Carter what she thinks of President Trump.

"All of us here voted for Trump, and we're optimistic about what he will do," she says.

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On the morning of December 8, 1958, eleven of the nation's richest businessmen braved single digit temperatures to attend a mysterious meeting in suburban Indianapolis. Millionaire candy magnate Robert Welch, known for inventing the Sugar Daddy bar, had invited these magnates to Indianapolis—without giving a reason—and asked them to stay for two days.

In a letter to former Internal Revenue Commissioner T. Coleman Andrews, Welch praised the men's "unshakable integrity, proven ability, and fervent patriotism." In 1956, Andrews had run for President as the candidate of the States' Rights Party — on a segregationist, anti-civil rights platform — and was the only invitee Welch did not personally know.

After exchanging firm handshakes in the breakfast room of a five-bedroom, Tudor-style house in the tony Meridian Park neighborhood, Welch addressed the group in a deadly serious tone. The United States was under threat from "an amoral gang of sophisticated criminals," Welch warned. "These cunning megalomaniacs seek to make themselves the absolute rulers of a human race of enslaved robots, in which every civilized trait has been destroyed."

God-hating, government-worshipping Communists had infiltrated newsrooms, public schools, legislative chambers and houses of worship. These apparatchiks were frighteningly close to total victory. Welch felt it in his gut.

Then, the businessman revealed his bold plan to crush the Communist menace: The chosen few gathered in this Indiana room would form the vanguard of a new political movement, an army of brave American patriots dedicated to preserving the country's Christian and constitutional foundations. Welch christened the group the John Birch Society — after a U.S. soldier cum Baptist missionary killed by Chinese Communists in 1945 — and laid out his goal: To destroy the "Communist conspiracy … or at least breaking its grip on our government and shattering its power within the United States."

Prominent Texans quickly became fans of the John Birch Society. Congressman Martin Dies, founder of the House Committee on un-American Activities (formed in 1938 to investigate suspected American Communists) contributed to the Society's magazine; Dallas oilman H.L Hunt, the richest man in the world, espoused Bircher views on his popular radio program; W.H. Criswell, head of the largest Baptist congregation in the United States, praised the Birchers from his Dallas pulpit; Major Gen. Edwin Walker, born in small-town Texas and commander of 10,000 troops stationed in post-war Europe, began distributing Bircher material to the men under his command. In 1961, Walker was admonished by the Kennedy administration for saying that "a number of prominent Americans as well as elements of the newspaper and television industries were tainted with Communist ideology." These sons of the Lone Star State, along with Welch, saw a nation careening towards unfettered Communism. They refused to remain silent.

Addressing the patriots gathered in Indianapolis, Welch didn't mince words about what was at stake: "For unless we can win that battle, the war for a better world will again be carried on through long feudal Dark Ages, after we have been killed, our children have been enslaved, and all we value has been destroyed."

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A week after Part One of the "The Constitution is the Solution" workshop, I drive to Holland for the remaining portion. While the lectures from the first weekend explained a political theory that could be boiled down to a few things — government programs and socialism are bad; the free market and Christianity are good — the titles of the second set of lectures suggested a more provocative call to action: "Exposing the Enemies of Freedom" and "Constitutional War Powers and the Enemy Within."

I pick up and study a worksheet that accompanies the video lectures. The first multiple-choice question asks me to identify "the Illuminati." The answer choices are: (*A) a myth, (B) an alien race of shape-shifters, (C) a group founded in the late 1700s, seeking world government*.

The lecture that goes with the worksheet warns about a massive, well-organized conspiracy of elites determined to destroy all religion, to glorify immorality, to take children from their parents and give them to the state, and to form a one-world government. The global elites, we are told, coalesced in Bavaria in 1776 and call themselves the Illuminati. The group, according to a 1966 essay by Welch, has "grandiose dreams of overthrowing all existing human institutions, and of rising out of the resulting chaos as the all-powerful rulers of a 'new order' of civilization."

After learning about the Illuminati, we are lectured about a much newer, but no less pernicious organization, the Council on Foreign Relations. Founded in 1921, the group ostensibly advocates globalization and free trade. According to the Council on Foreign Relations' website, the group is an "independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher." Board members have included banker David

Rockefeller, journalist Tom Brokaw and former U.S. Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell.

For $19.95, you can order a documentary film from the John Birch Society website called "ShadowRing," which promises to "set the record straight" on the "criminal deeds" of the Council on Foreign Relations. To the Birchers, the Council on Foreign Relations shares the same goals as the Illuminati: "to destroy the freedom and independence of the United States and lead our nation into a world government."

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At ten minutes past noon on a Thursday in February, about 40 members of the John Birch Society gather at Christine's Steaks and Seafood in Houston, many of them sipping from glasses of iced tea. They have come to the restaurant, which sits next to an eight-lane road lined with shopping centers, to hear a speech from the most famous of the country's founding fathers.

But George Washington is running late.

Mark Collins, who has a robust career as a Washington impersonator and as a pastor at a Baptist church, had to drive in from his home in the tiny town of Yorktown, Texas, about an hour away.

"So happy to be here with you patriots. The JBS is the tip of the spear," Collins bellows when he finally enters the dining room. Collins, who is 6'4", sports yellow breeches, a blue military coat with gold epaulettes and brass buttons the size of half dollars, and a gray revolutionary pigtail.

Collins has portrayed Washington on the floor of the Texas House of Representatives, at former Texas Governor Rick Perry's Prayer Breakfast, and in the movie "National Treasure 2: The Book of Secrets," alongside actor Nicholas Cage.

Today, Collins is preaching his Americanist gospel to fervent believers in frenetic Houston. The sprawling metropolis, home to the nation's biggest oil companies, the world's largest rodeo and former U.S. President George H.W. Bush, has exploded from a sleepy backwater and become the country's fourth largest city. It's also the most ethnically diverse city in America, though Collins' audience in the seafood restaurant is entirely white. The pastor stands in front of a banner featuring a bald eagle and the John Birch Society's toll free telephone number, 1-800-JBS-USA1. The banner declares: "Less government, more responsibility, and — with God's help — a better world."

"We must teach our children their heritage," Collins tells the crowd. "We've slowly forgotten our principles." But there is a powerful reason to rejoice, Collins adds, a reason for renewed optimism: God has sent America a new, powerful leader. He's a good man, a moral man. God has delivered Donald J. Trump to save the United States of America.

"Our new President is trying to push back against unjust tyrants who have taken over our nation," Collins says. Trump, with our help, can prevail in this fight for the country's soul, Collins tells the audience. Dozens of people clap.

The great struggles American patriots face today are not new, Collins shouts. The enthusiastic crowd seems to invigorate Collins. He is pacing back and forth, brimming with energy. "And don't forget this is not the first time the United States has gone to war with Muslims terrorists. In 1801 we waged war against Muslim terrorists in Tripoli."

The Washington impersonator and Texas pastor is referencing the first overseas war fought by the United States, the First Barbary War, which pitted the United States against the nations known as the Barbary States: Algiers, Morocco, Tunis and Tripoli. In 1801, Tripoli seized U.S. merchant vessels and demanded payment for their return, which U.S. President Thomas Jefferson refused to render. Instead Jefferson sent the U.S. Navy to free the ships.

Academic consensus holds that religion had little to do with the war, but Collins' remark about fighting Muslim terrorists in 19th Century appears to resonate with the crowd, and many in the audience nod their heads as Collins speaks. John McManus, former John Birch Society President, once echoed the same line of thinking—that the United States' fight against Muslim terrorists can be traced back centuries—in *The New American* magazine in 2016. "Wherever Islam dominates, people of other faiths are classified as second-class citizens who must pay a tax and, in some cases, face execution," McManus wrote.

In Houston, Collins continues his history lesson: "And let us not forget in 1774 the government, the British government, tried to ban the original assault rifle … the Brown Bess. That attempt to seize weapons brought about a revolution."

More than a dozen audience members applaud.

"Just horrible," an elderly woman sitting in a wheelchair next to me says.

Collin's voice grows louder. "Many today don't realize that we are facing the same gun control tactics by our own federal government that our forefathers faced from the British," he says.

"Just horrible," the elderly woman says again.

For 15 minutes, Collins orates on George Washington's close relationship with Christ. Washington spent the first and last hour of every day in prayer, Collins says. Then, the presidential impersonator lays down a challenge. "Make no mistake, there is a war for the soul of this nation. But with work and sacrifice the United States can be restored as a nation," he proclaims.

"All it takes is an on-fire minority setting fire in the minds of men."

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To better understand what motivates people to join the John Birch Society, I call Chip Berlet, former senior analyst at Political Research Associates, a left-leaning think tank in XXXX (where is it/he?), and co-author of "Right-Wing Populism in America: Too Close for Comfort." Berlet has studied the John Birch Society, and right-wing extremism, for three decades.

Berlet tells me the resurgence of the John Birch Society taps into populism that surfaces periodically, especially during times of cultural and demographic upheaval.

The nation's demographic landscape has undergone dramatic shifts. From 1955 to 2014, the percentage of U.S. citizens who identified as Protestant nosedived from 70 percent to 46 percent according to a Gallup poll. The percentage of citizens who identified as non-Hispanic white decreased from 89 percent to 63 percent according to the Pew Research Center. And since we all have a psychological tendency toward tribalism—an evolutionary tendency to be suspicious of and even hostile to members of outside groups—many white, Christian Americans are full of anxiety, Berlet says.

I convey to Berlet the latter-day Bircher arguments about federal government overreach, states' rights and the Illuminati-linked, globalist conspiracy. Berlet chuckles

and says, in effect, that nothing has changed in the group's philosophy: "The John Birch Society views white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethnocentrism as the true expression of America. They use constitutionalist arguments and conspiracist scapegoating to mask this," he says.

Many white, Christian Americans do seem to be searching for an explanation for their decreasing cultural clout, and the John Birch Society offers a compelling culprit: a secret, nefarious cabal is responsible for the country's ills. The story is comforting in its simplicity. And while there are both liberal and conservative conspiracy-minded groups, more of them fall on the political right. Placing blame on conspiracies is seductive to social conservatives because of the way their brains are hard-wired, argues Colin Holbrooke, an evolutionary psychologist and research scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles. "It's not a pathology, or because they're less intelligent," Holbrooke tells me.

Holbrooke co-authored a study for the journal Psychological Science in which subjects were presented with a series of false statements such as, "terrorist attacks in the U.S. have increased since Sept 11, 2001," and "hotel room keycards are often encoded with personal information that can be read by thieves."

Social conservatives—people who are against things like gay marriage and abortion—were more credulous about claims of danger in the world, Holbrooke says, and the phenomenon has roots in evolutionary psychology. Being hyper-aware of threats could potentially save your life, especially if you live in a cave and a lion, tiger, or bear is on the prowl.

Other scientific studies have shown structural differences between the brains of conservatives and liberals. Conservatives have larger amygdalas (the part of the brain responsible for detecting and responding to threats) than liberals, according to a 2011 study from the University College London. The same study found that liberals have larger anterior cingulate cortexes (the part of the brain which, among other things, helps humans tolerate uncertainty). These differences likely make social conservatives more susceptible to claims about things that could potentially hurt them, Holbrooke says. “That’s what you’re probably seeing with the John Birchers in Texas and the conspiracies they fear,” he tells me.

After speaking with Holbrooke, I think back to a conversation I had with Jan Carter after “The Constitution is the Solution” workshop in Holland. I told Carter that it was hard for me to believe that our elected officials, particularly in Texas, are part of a secret conspiracy to form a one-world government, or that they are part of the Illuminati.

How about staunchly conservative Texas Republicans such as President George W. Bush and Governor Greg Abbott, I asked her.

"George W. Bush didn't have noble intentions,” Carter said. “He wanted a one-world government."

I suggested to Carter that Abbott, at least, seems to genuinely distrust the federal government. After all, when he was Texas Attorney General, Abbott sued the Obama administration at least two dozen times. In 2013 Abbott described his job this way: "I go into the office, I sue Barack Obama and I go home.”

And in April 2015, when some Texans feared that a U.S. military training exercise called Jade Helm 15 was a covert attempt by the federal government to invade

the state, seize Texans' guns, and imprison conservative citizens in abandoned Wal-Marts, Abbott deployed the Texas State Guard to monitor the U.S. military.

Carter shrugged her shoulders.

"Sometimes politicians do things just for show," she said.

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